

Building a Collection, One Sip at a Time

JONATHAN SHIPLEY takes stock of breweriana in the Pacific Northwest and finds much more than “99 bottles of beer on the wall.”

THE SHIPBUILDER WAS THIRSTY. The burly labourer had toiled for hours on the Olympia waterfront. He was tired. He was dirty. He was hot. It was a summer’s day in 1902 and all he wanted was a cool drink with the guys before heading to his small home up the hill.

He headed down 4th Avenue to his favourite saloon with his co-workers. They walked in, welcomed by like-minded men—brakemen, loggers, longshoremen. He pulled up a stool and asked the barkeep for one of those new beers created across town at the base of the Deschutes River. “It’s the water,” the barman said, handing the shipbuilder a bottle of Olympia Beer. The man drank it. Satisfied, he left for home. The empty bottle found its way a century later into the collection of someone who collects breweriana, or beer-related paraphernalia and ephemera.

It’s 1984 in Portland, Oregon. Under the moniker Columbia River Brewery, a craft brewery opens. Later named BridgePort Brewing Company, it is Portland’s oldest existing craft brewery. An unopened case of Portland’s first microbrew, BridgePort Ale, finds its way into someone’s collection. Another collector has some early Columbia River Brewery coasters.

Legend has it that in 1865, John Lemp, an Idahoan, traded a tea cup of gold dust for the Felix-Collins Brewery in Boise. Lemp became known as the “Beer King of Idaho,” peddling his beverages to thirsty miners, cowboys and anyone else tramping through the city. A collector now has newspaper ads from Lemp’s long-standing brewing ventures from the *Idaho Statesman*. Another has old ledgers.

It’s 1984 in Vancouver, British Columbia. The first microbrewery in Canada opens, supplying German pilsners to thirsty

drinkers. Granville Island Brewing releases its first batch of beer, Granville Island Lager. A collector still has a six-pack, unopened.

LOGOS & LETTERING DRAW COLLECTORS

Among the elements of breweriana that makes it attractive to collectors—whether they’re gathering cans, bottles, bottle caps, bottle openers, coasters, beer trays, wooden cases, neon signs, advertisements or posters—are the logos and lettering that distinguish each brand and position the beer in the marketplace. Gary Flynn is arguably the most knowledgeable person on earth about Northwest brewing. His house in Bellingham, Washington, showcases his interest. Signs dot the walls. Mugs and steins sit on shelves. Glasses and bottles can be found there, too. He’s a historian, first and foremost. He has written histories on the Centennial Brewery (1876–1918) of Butte, Montana. He has written on the Acme Brewing Company (1906–54) of San Francisco, California. He has written about Walla Walla’s Pioneer Brewing Company (1941–55), Pacific Brewing and Malting of Tacoma, and Seattle’s Bay View Brewery (1883–1919), which birthed one of the best-known Pacific Northwest beers, Rainier. Flynn has Rainier Beer collectibles and historical research on the brewery—lots of it. A sparkling moss-green glass bottle made in the late 19th century bears the embossed words “Bay View Brewing Co./Seattle, Wash.” A pre-Prohibition Rainier Beer glass claims, “There’s Vigor & Strength in Every Drop.” He has a vintage Rainier Light embroidered patch.

What links these items together for Flynn is the arrangement of words, the making of the



brewer's identity through the design of the labels. "For me, brewery ephemera provides pleasure from the graphic beauty of the lithographer's art, but it also provides valuable information for the researcher from facts found on the label or letterhead," he says. "Unfortunately, just as beautifully hand-written letters have become a thing of the past, so has the gracefully illustrated brewery ephemera become a lost art. It is now as illustrative as a text message."

"Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall" is a popular lyrical refrain. Ninety-nine bottles is nothing, however, for breweriana collector Ron Werner. He was an undisputed *Guinness Book of World Records* holder for his beer bottle collection. The Carlsberg Brewing Company currently holds the record for number of bottles, but Werner still thinks he has more (he just has to fill out the paperwork and do some more documentation). How many bottles of beer are on Werner's wall? 24,540 unique bottles. There are also 1,700

beer glasses, 7,000 beer cans, 1,000 beer signs, and oodles of other brewing-related ephemera.

While Flynn laments the decline of elegance in beer labels and other ephemera, Werner says it still plays an important role and gives collectors scope to develop collections of interesting uses of lettering. East Coast breweries tend to be in the forefront of label design, he says, giving their beers an appeal to consumers through eye-catching uses of type and imagery.

"The first buy, for a new brewery, is usually because of packaging, and the return buys are based on quality and taste. Having an amazing and colourful label should help with breaking into a new market," he says. Often these labels take their inspiration from the older labels that he and collectors such as Flynn cherish. "I do see a recent trend in throw-back style designs, such as Deschutes' new Mirror Ponds and current Iron City and Yuengling labels," says Werner.

GROUPS POUR RESOURCES INTO EDUCATION, PRESERVATION

There are organizations for people like Flynn and Werner. The American Breweriana Association is a non-profit organization founded in 1982 “to advance,” its mission statement notes, “the public knowledge of brewing and breweriana; to serve historians and collectors, and dedicated to the preservation of the memories and artifacts of America’s historical breweries.” The association has chapters across the US. The Pacific Northwest chapter is based in Portland, presided over by Norman Irby.

The National Association Breweriana Advertising organization (NABA) is the first national breweriana collectibles organization in the United States dedicated “to the preservation and study of American brewing advertising.” NABA has chapters in almost every state as well as in Canada.

Bob Kay, a NABA member based in Batavia, Illinois, and perhaps the doyen of North America breweriana collectors, says the rise of microbreweries has created new opportunities for collectors and brought the interest in label design to the forefront of many people’s consciousness as new brands seek new identities.

“The emergence of microbreweries and brewpubs, which began in the 1980s, has led to an important new group of label collectors,” he writes on his Web site. “With the advent of micros, the process and struggles of developing a new brewery seems to be repeating itself. Already, labels in the hands of collectors are just about all that remains for microbreweries that have closed their doors.”

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~ Jonathan Shipley is a freelance writer based on Vashon Island, WA. For further reading, and samples of labels, visit the National Association Breweriana Advertising (www.nababrew.com) and the webpages of Bob Kay (home.comcast.net/~beerlabel). Robin Goldstein and Seamus Campbell’s reference book *The Beer Trials* (Fearless Critic, 2010), reviewed in *Amphora* 155, also offers comments on label design and their fit with the contents of bottles.

NEW MEMBERS

Welcome!

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Karen Flynn, Burnaby, BC
Paula Grasdal, Vancouver, BC
Michael Horowitz, West Vancouver, BC
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Jeanne Johnson, Vancouver, BC
Nicholas Kennedy, Toronto, ON
Bryant Knox, North Vancouver, BC
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